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(EDITORS)

RESEARCH TERMINALS
IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

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HOW MEDIA LITERACY CAN HELP FILTER INFORMATION FROM DISINFORMATION ATTACKS

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Abstract

Media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media. It is a set of skills that allows people to become more critical consumers of media. Media literacy is important because it helps people understand how media messages are constructed and how they affect us. Researchers have also noticed that *“as we witness a further major shift in information and communication technology (ICT), a new form of literacy is emerging, uneasily termed computer literacy or internet literacy.”* (Livingstone, 2004, p. 1) Fake news represents the phenomenon of mass media, especially social media, that is fraudulent, false, or misrepresented. Numerous studies have examined how the public perceives media, and while the content of the coverage differs among groups, there is increasing evidence that large segments of the public believe information that it is fake. Moreover, fake news is often perceived as more credible by those with a strong ideological orientation. In the present paper we will explore the relationship between media literacy, information, disinformation and fake news and present opportunities through which disinformation attacks can be minimized. Although the real-world consequences of fake news have not yet been fully documented, public concern regarding the effects of fake news are highly debated. (Jang & Kim, 2018, p. 295)

Keywords: media literacy, journalism, communication, fake news, disinformation

1. Introduction

Studies show that those with greater identity with their own partisan groups showed greater self-other disparity over the perceived influence of fake news. *“Strong Republicans and Democrats believed that other party members are more vulnerable to the effects of fake news”* (Jang & Kim, 2018, p. 299). Indeed, the polarization of beliefs makes more people

susceptible to click-bait articles that work as political arguments. These people would even likely further divide themselves by digging deep into ideas and making more “belief-based constructs” (Rhodes et al., 2004, p. 392) We also argue that complex, multifaceted and multilayered behaviors are rarely coded using a single scale that represents all beliefs and practices relevant to the behavior. Most of the belief-based scales that we have come across seem to represent the relative strength of belief versus practice and are unlikely to capture aspects of actual belief or practice.

2. Social media, fake news and disinformation

Social media are increasingly popular platforms used by individuals, professionals, and organizations to communicate and distribute information. As a consequence, various bad actors and irresponsible users are spreading false news, information and misinformation on social media. This phenomenon was recognized as a serious issue in the mainstream media in 2016 and it prompted various debates on the responsibility of social media platforms to deal with false information on their platform. Fake news (and viral hoaxes) refer to intentionally false information disseminated on social media with the aim of increasing website traffic and consequently website clicks, but often for ulterior motives such as the publication of false information in a competitive environment or by means of nefarious activities to defraud users. Fake news are often created by people, but in some cases they can be fabricated and published by media corporations, who want to increase readership or, more recently, even by AI – “neural fake news”.(Zellers et al., 2019)

We first consider what the purpose of an article of news is, and define “news” to mean (i) observations of facts, (ii) what happened, and (iii) what could have happened. We then consider the reasons that an article of news is deliberately false. We conclude that intentional falsification of the news content is the sole reason for making an article of fake news. We also identify the characteristics that constitute a fake news article and define the characteristics of fake news, in terms of its content and intent, in accordance with our definition of fake news–“*Fake news is a news article that is intentionally and verifiably false.*” (Shu et al., 2017) Another researcher states that “*fake news is the deliberate presentation of (typically) false or misleading claims as news, where the claims are misleading by design.*”(Gelfert, 2018, p. 108), bringing emphasis on the scope of the fake news and the intentional “design” of the fake message.

Studies on misinformation are increasingly tying political polarization, partisan media, and national identity to citizen mis-information. A variety of factors have been proposed to account for individual citizens' ability and motivation to spot mis-information, for instance: person-specific processing, informational resources, task-specific processing, need for social norms, and socialisation. Many of these explanations align well with established explanations of why people might become misinformed, e.g., political polarisation, fact-resistant agendas, or cultural, social, and personal life experiences. However, citizen mis-information also seems to be driven by broader contextual and social factors. Moreover, our understanding of individual information processing needs to be further expanded, including the crucial contribution of social networks to the context of individual information processing. (Dodge & Rabiner, 2004, p. 1003)

Scheufele and Krause note that it is important to note that “misinformation” can be broadly defined as information that is incorrect, possibly by accident, while comparatively, “disinformation” has sometimes been used to denote a specific type of misinformation that is intentionally false, while the distinctions between these terms—as well as terms like “rumor” or “fake news”—have not always been clearly drawn in research pertaining to these topics. (Scheufele & Krause, 2019, p. 7662)

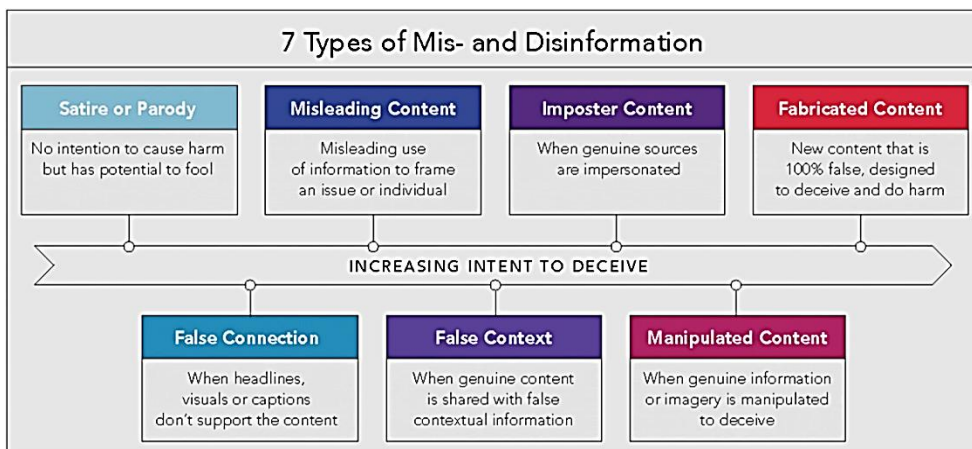


Figure 1.7 Types of Mis - and Disinformation, according to Claire Wardle, modified by Lucy Reading (artist). Source: (Waldrop, 2017)

Even though the term became widely used after Donald Trump started using it as a political message, fake news has been studied since the

20th century. A recent definition and taxonomy identified the following issues (*Disinformation and 'Fake News': Interim Report - Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee - House of Commons, n.d.*) :

1. *Fabricated content: completely false content;*
2. *Manipulated content: distortion of genuine information or imagery, for example a headline that is made more sensationalist, often popularised by 'clickbait';*
3. *Imposter content: impersonation of genuine sources, for example by using the branding of an established news agency;*
4. *Misleading content: misleading use of information, for example by presenting comment as fact;*
5. *False context of connection: factually accurate content that is shared with false contextual information, for example when a headline of an article does not reflect the content;*
6. *Satire and parody: presenting humorous but false stories as if they are true. Although not usually categorised as fake news, this may unintentionally fool readers*

Modern societies require institutions capable of informing and educating the masses, empowering them to participate in the public square and engage in public debate. But over the past two decades the Internet has completely remade the power balance, exacerbating and diversifying the divide. *"Today's technologies, with their elaborate infrastructures for uploading, commenting, liking, and sharing, have created an almost ideal environment for manipulation and abuse—one that arguably threatens any sense of shared truth."*(Waldrop, 2017) And that technology is only evolving and growing in usage. Thus, a response is required to help modern citizens distinguish information that has a degree of certainty from one which is misinformation or disinformation. This is a process that can be approached from both a technical and a social standpoint, but the solution will probably come from a mixture of both areas.

3. Proposal of possibility - media literacy as an instrument against misinformation

Information literacy is the ability to find information and evaluate its value. Anyone who is concerned about being able to sort fact from fiction should develop their information literacy skills. "Media literacy" is used to describe the knowledge of media literacy competencies that learners acquire

to analyze and deal effectively with a wide range of media texts and artifacts and to navigate the networks of communication and material flows that allow discourse to take place and information that circulates. Broadly, literacy involves “*gaining the skills and knowledge to read, interpret, and produce certain types of texts and artifacts and to gain the intellectual tools and capacities to fully participate in one’s culture and society.*” (Kellner & Share, 2005). Researchers agree that education and literacy are intimately connected. Media and cultural studies have helped us to understand how media are often used to reinforce political and social inequalities, as well as racism, sexism and homophobia. This is not to say that all forms of media have necessarily become more dishonest, corrupt or corrupting.

The social problem of media literacy today is not simply a theoretical problem for critical media studies. It affects us personally. It is related to the trust we have in our political and cultural institutions and the way the democratic process functions, as media is considered an important part of the modern democratic state.

When teaching media literacy, The Center for Media Literacy (CML) has identified five core concepts that can help create a framework accessible both to students and teachers (Kellner & Share, 2005, pp. 374–377):

1. Principle of Non-Transparency: *All media messages are “constructed”*
2. Codes and Conventions: *Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules*
3. Audience Decoding: *Different people experience the same media message differently*
4. Content and Message: *Media have embedded values and points of view*
5. Motivation: *Media are organized to gain profit and/or power*

All the core concepts are related to a basic issue – the one of trust in media, and how that trust should not be always offered.

Teaching students to be critical consumers of information and to be skilled readers, writers, editors, social communicators, and critical media activists will allow them to be an informed and evolved part of their communities in the digital age. Teaching students how to research, evaluate, and critically interpret information, which will be integral to their digital literacy, will also ensure that students are able to comprehend, evaluate, and

critique ideas through their understanding of the message and the possibility to differentiate from information and disinformation. Learning these new areas of study will allow students to think critically about the politics and practices of the media and social networks in the digital age.

This approach has been previously suggested: *“the media literacy approach, which is the main subject of this article, focuses on the audiences critical ability to process fake news.”* (Jones-Jang et al., 2019), researchers predicting that a higher degree of media literacy improves the chances of identification of fake news stories. This highlights the importance of a clear understanding of media literacy, and the need for a shift from a focus on objective knowledge to a focus on people’s complex engagement with media and information. Research shows that people have difficulty discerning what is true and what is false (Wineburg et al., 2016) and suggest that attempting to define the validity of information, or seeing media as “objective,” risks constraining people’s thinking and deepening their pre-existing opinions and perspectives on their personal and collective identities.

Research has shown, though, that critical understanding of media messages and media systems (media literacy or news literacy) is not as important in identifying fake news as skills to navigate and locate information with efficiency and accuracy (information literacy). In other words, to identify fake news stories, it is crucial that individuals are equipped with the skills and competencies to sustain and update their access to rapidly changing information systems. (Jones-Jang et al., 2019). It’s also true that the more you consume information, the more you are able to discern between accurate and inaccurate information.

A key challenge with analyzing headline accuracy and article perception changes in response to specific articles is that the sources of the content we are analyzing do not always make clear which claims made in those articles are accurate or not. The vast majority of people share stories with little regard for their accuracy and that accuracy may be irrelevant to the motivations for sharing these articles. But there is also good news - research found that *“a simple, scalable media literacy intervention can decrease the perceived accuracy of false news content and help people to better distinguish it from factual mainstream news in both the United States and India. Moreover, the improvement in headline accuracy rating performance we observe does not depend on whether the claims in question align with respondents’ political predispositions.”* (Guess et al., 2020, p. 15543). The aforementioned study found

that the media literacy campaigns helped reduce the perceived accuracy of false news stories and the likelihood of clicking on them. Media literacy “inoculation” campaigns can be effective at reducing the perceived accuracy of false news stories, helping users more accurately gauge the credibility of news content they encounter on different topics or issues.

Media culture and pedagogy are inseparable. Social debates, media criticism, new forms of education, critiques of scientific and educational paradigms, and critiques of the nature of communication in societies in process of restructuring are the dynamic interplay between social, cultural, scientific, and educational contexts and the conditions and contents of pedagogy that directly affect individuals, groups and institutions. *“It is highly irresponsible in the face of saturation by the Internet and media culture to ignore these forms of socialization and education.”* (Kellner & Share, n.d., p. 5), because *“media literacy education makes visible what are often invisible structures, with a goal of creating watchful buyers, skeptical observers, and well-informed citizen.”* (Bulger & Davison, 2018, p. 12)

Media literacy combines academic study of media from multiple disciplines, with applied practice from pedagogy and curriculum, providing students with the most up-to-date methods of studying and understanding how to consume information and mass media. Online media are viewed through a new lens, of political, economic, and social influences, and students become more familiar with social networks and the subtle, yet pervasive psychological biases in media content.

4. Conclusions

Media literacy is important for all citizens who intentionally, or without knowing it, consume media, the presence of which has become wider and more diverse with the new digital technologies and the growing participation of laypersons. Media literacy thus has to find its role both in primary, secondary and higher education either on its own, or presumably – with more likelihood – as part of some kind of multiple or multimodal literacy. (Koltay, 2011, p. 219). Thus, through an improved system of media literacy education we could increase the chances of our students and citizens to discern valid information from mis- or disinformation attacks. Research has shown that *“the greater one’s knowledge about the news media—from the kinds of news covered, to the commercial context in which news is produced, to the effects on public opinion news can have—the less likely one*

will fall prey to conspiracy theories."(Craft et al., 2017, p. 9), that "*critical media literacy [...] would better equip young citizens with resilience to 'information disorder'*" (McDougall, 2019), bringing even more arguments to the importance of the introduction of media literacy studies.

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